

MALCOM X, SEPARATIST - DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., INTEGRATIONIST
A LOOK AT TWO OPPOSITE VIEWS

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1960's I have had a very real interest in the racial problems of our nation. This interest was increased when I became pastor of a suburban, white church in Richmond, Virginia. I found myself reading more and more on black leaders and their activities. I was just as interested in the reactions of my people and the leaders of our community regarding just what to do about the situation. Thus, my interest is not a new experience.

I had intended to include Eldridge Clever in this presentation, but after much reading, concluded that the presentation would suffer if I included another view. This is not to conclude that a Communist like Clever is not important. The exact opposite is true. But for the sake of this presentation I felt the best two black leaders to present were Malcom X, the separatist, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the integrationist.

I have tried to include the motivation for their respective positions and how they arrived at their various views. Of necessity, a brief review of their early lives has been included to aid the reader in understanding my method of presentation. I have tried to look at the sociological as well as the theological reasons for their different approach to the same problem.

CHAPTER I

MALCOM X, THE SEPARATIST

Malcom Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925. His father was a Baptist minister, an ex-Garveyite, an active man who was very much involved in the racial problems of his day. His activities probably had a great deal to do with his home being burned by the Ku Klux Klan in 1931. It was only a short time later that he was killed in a tragic "accident" by being hit by a streetcar. That death plunged the Little family into abstract poverty and they suffered many hardships, which left a deep impression on the mind of young Malcom.

Not able to continue to support the family, they disintegrated, and after a few years, Malcom made his way to New York. Before long, he was quite active in the underworld activities of Harlem.

By the age of 18, Malcom was versatile "Big Red." He hired from four to six men variously plying dope, numbers, bootleg whiskey and diverse forms of hustling.

While serving a term in the prison in Concord, Massachusetts, Malcom was introduced to the Black Muslims by his brother, Philbert, also an inmate at the time. Having been exposed to the ideas of separation of the races by his father, he took a very active interest in the movement and began to write to Muhammad every day during the remainder of his term.

When Malcom left prison in 1952, he went directly to Detroit. For two years he was a special student under Muhammad and in 1954, he was named the minister of Temple Number Seven in Harlem. He was one of the few to be granted an "Original" name, "Shabazz."

This young, attractive, and active man rapidly became one of the chief spokesman for the Black Muslims. He appeared at

¹Malcom X, The Autobiography of Malcom X (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964), p. 2.

a number of colleges and universities and he was sought after by radio and television alike for appearances. His name was in print many times and publishers were anxious to publish his works.

Malcom was the epitomy of the black separatist. In March, 1962, he debated Mr. James Farmer, the intergrationist. The following statement examplifies Malcom's position regarding the black man's position and feelings in a white man's society.

We who are black in the black belt, or black community, or black neighborhood can easily see that our people who settle for intergration are usually the middle-class so called Negroes, who are in the minority. Why? Because they have confidence in the white man; they have absolute confidence that you will change. They believe that they can change you, they believe that there is still hope in the American dream. But what to them is the American dream to us is an American nightmare, and we don't think that it is possible for the American white man in sincerity to take the action necessary to correct the unjust conditions that 20 million black people here are made to suffer morning, noon, and night. And because we don't have any hope or confidence or faith in the American white man's ability to bring about a change in the injustices that exist, instead of asking or seeking to intergrate into the American society we want to face the facts of the problem the way they are, and separate ourselves. And in separating ourselves this doesn't mean that we are anti-white or anti-American, or anti-anything. We feel, that if intergration all these years hasn't solved the problem yet, then we want to try something new, something different and something that is in accord² with the conditions as they actually exist.²

In trying to evaluate the motivation behind Malcom X's social deviance, one is at once confronted with the fact that both he and Elijah Muhammad had fathers who were ministers of the Christian Church. Both were from large families and both had suffered many hardships as young blacks.

²Malcom X and James Farmer, "Separation or Intergration: A Debate," Dialogue Magazine, II, 3 (May 1962), 14-18.

Malcom X was one who legitimated his deviance (delinquency) by saying it was done as a result of the social conditions forced upon him by the white society. He experienced the many troubles of his father, who he was convinced was murdered, and later his family. These early experiences were never to leave him. As a result of his fathers death and the loss of his family, he was deprived of those primary relationships so necessary for security in youth. As he saw his life, all those loses were the direct result of the white man's treatment of all blacks. He found himself in a society of secondary relationships; where the single most important aspect of life was that of getting ahead financially. He was convinced that in this white dominated society, any legitimate means to accomplish this goal was denied him as a black man. It was also his experience that the blacks who got ahead and were respected in their own community were the ones who were engaged in illegal activities and if those activities provided the white man with what he wanted, the provider was accepted and even held as one who was a smart operator. Years later, speaking on a T.V. documentary, he said:

I charge the white man with being the greatest liar on earth...I charge the white man with being the greatest robber on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest deceiver on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest troublemaker on earth...³

Up to the time of his death in 1965, Malcom X continued to mistrust the white man. "There is no white man a Muslim can trust."⁴, was a remark he made on more than one occasion. It seems natural that a person with that view of others would find ready acceptance in the Black Muslim community. He served with vigor seldom found and he was loyal and effective until

³C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 3., Note 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 190.

he split with Muhammad in 1963.

Malcom X was able to instill pride in his black listeners. He was able to command respect from many within the white community, though they may have disagreed with what he said. He never lost faith in the capitalist system like some blacks did; rather he encouraged blacks to copy the white man because he was successful. But Malcom X had no love for any white man and he believed that separation of the races was the only possible solution to the race problem in America.

Considering his past, it is not impossible to understand his feelings and actions. It was a good thing that he became a Black Muslim; for regardless of what one might personally feel towards him, the black community gave a great leader to this country. He learned to be proud of being black and he was able to instill that pride in thousands of his fellow black Americans.

CHAPTER II

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., THE INTERGRATIONIST

Unlike many of his contemporary black leaders, Dr. King did not come from the ghetto. He was the son of a successful Atlanta Baptist minister. Born in January 1929, young Martin grew up in a segregated, hostile, and often, oppressive society, but he did not suffer from poverty nor did he lack opportunity. He was made aware of his race early and did much study and reading to try to understand more about society and his place in that society. He loved to read, and he spent many hours studying, while others of his age were playing. Perhaps that is why he was accepted as a freshman in Morehouse College at the age of fifteen. He continued to study for years to come, and he never lost his quest for knowledge throughout his life. In 1954, he completed his work at Boston and received his PhD. From there he moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he pastored Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. It was that same year which saw the Supreme Court, in Brown vs. Board of Education, Topeka, reverse the separate but equal concept in education, which had stood since 1896.

It was on December 5, 1955, when Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, that his climb to national fame was started. Four days prior, a Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to move further back in the Negro section of a bus. As a result, she was arrested. Dr. King and other black leaders immediately set about to come to her assistance. On December 2, the leaders announced a one day boycott of the Montgomery buses to take place on December 5th. That boycott lasted 382 days.

The first small step had been taken and is now viewed as the very first successful Negro protest against discriminatory social practices in the new move towards true racial equality and justice in America. It was certainly the starting point

of Dr. King. From that time until his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, became preeminent in the quest for social justice for the American Negro.⁵

Unlike many other black charismatic leaders, Dr. King was not anti-white. He was very much pro-black and pro-American. He was motivated by a love for his "Jesus" and a love for his people. He deplored all that smacked of injustice for all people; for he was convinced that any injustices brought harm to both the injured and the perpetrator. His desire was for all men to find the good in himself and to see it in others. Even in the face of great personal danger, he did not lose his desire for loving others. When his home was bombed on January 30, 1956, Dr. King dismissed the crowd of angry blacks by saying:

My wife and my baby are all right. I want you people to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve problems with violence. Remember the words of Jesus: "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword!" We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out across the centuries: "Love your enemies." This is what we must live by. We must learn to meet hate with love.⁶

Here his theological emphasis is very evident. It was to carry him through until the day of his assassination.

It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform⁷ that I had been seeking for so many months.

⁵R. H. Brisbane, The Black Vanguard, (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1970), p. 249.

⁶Jim Bishop, The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr., (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), pp. 160-161.

⁷Martin L. King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1958), p. 79.

Dr. King was not adverse to borrowing from Gandhi because he saw in that movement the idea that he also found in the teachings of Jesus.

But it is also important to note that in Dr. King we find a man motivated by social issues to utilize his theology to bring about social change. His theology dictates his method of operation, which appears to be deviant behavior. It was deemed deviant in so far as it violated the long accepted social standards of the community. So long as he operated as the pastor of an all black church, lived in an all black community, and did not challenge the status quo he was an accepted member of a tolerated sub-culture. He was a good "Nigger" and was relatively safe to live out his life with his people.

This is what the vast majority of blacks had done, but the time of patience had run out for this "Nigger."

Wait?...when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;...when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" - then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.

Written while jailed in Bermingham, it is wrought with frustration not towards the "Red-Necks", but towards the white liberals who wanted Dr. King to slow down. But caught up in

⁸ Brisbane, The Black Vanguard, p. 248.

the tide of events, he would not and did not turn back the tide of success the black could feel carrying him forward.

The true greatness of Dr. King is no more evident than can be seen in his speech in Washington in August 1963. To repeat that great speech would consume more space than is possible in this presentation, but Dr. King did have a dream and that dream consumed his efforts until his death. That dream set the hearts of many thousands of his followers on fire. That dream called for all Americans to join hands in bringing true freedom to all our people, united to build a nation where all would be truly free at last.

To Dr. King, nonviolence was a real philosophy to live by and not a mere tactic to be used to achieve an end. In his "Nonviolent Resistance to Evil" he pointed out:

First, it must be emphasized that nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist...The method is passive physically, but strongly active spiritually...it is active non-violent resistance to evil.

...nonviolence is that it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding.

...this method is that attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing evil.

...is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation...

...it avoids not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit.

...it is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice.⁹

That a man rich in religion and philosophy could preach this gospel is not surprising, but that he was able to get thousands of his followers to do just that is just short of amazing to me. Gandhi did it in India, but that was all they could do. Here in America, with a psychological desire for instant everything, it is to me, a miracle.

⁹Francis L. Broderick & August Meier, Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1965), pp. 263-268.

Dr. King, the intergrationist, was that type of person. He took his time in deciding what course of action he would take. He did that all his life. But once the decision was made, he dedicated his whole being to the cause.

When this great Negro leader met his death, his memory and his work continued. His spirit and his dedication to the cause of justice carried on, and every American, black and white, can hold their head a little higher because of this giant of a Christian man.

CONCLUSION

Intergration or separation, which is it to be? Only time will answer that question. But it must be answered by every American regardless of race. Whether one follows Malcom X or Dr. King or any one of the other black leaders of our nation, the question will not go away. The problem is as real as you or I.

Too long we have let things go their way and hoped under our breath that everything would be alright in the end. But everything is far from alright.

From this presentation and the reading that went into its preparation, I must join forces with Dr. King. This is done inspite of the fact that I agree with much of what Malcom X had to say. If our country is to continue to grow we must not separate ourselves into two different camps. Rather, we can join hands to work together in understanding and love for each other.

In reality, both these great Americans wanted a better life for their black brothers. One wanted it because he hated all that was white. The other wanted it because he hated everything that was evil, regardless of who it was hurting. Both sounded a message that needed to be heard and still needs to be heard. The twenty million blacks of this nation are not willing to wait another one hundred years for the next step to be taken.

In reconciliation we have a means of getting together and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was willing to confront this nation with the evil we have lived with all our years. But he had a dream that we could overcome our problems. I share that dream.

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